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Manifesto Check: Tories' sport manifesto is committed to the elite only

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THE CONVERSATION

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Manifesto Check: Tories' sport manifesto is committed to the elite only

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"You don't know what you're doing!" - Tory sport plans are not enough. PA/ Andrew Yates

In its **manifesto**, the Conservative Party plans on investing in primary school sport, improving community facilities, investing in sport to improve health and increasing the involvement of women.

It is evident that the Conservatives place an emphasis on an active life, but they fail to check decreasing participation in flagship sports, and the deep impact which austerity has had on sport participation and facilities. A properly integrated, properly funded, cross-departmental plan for sport remains as **elusive** as ever.

Prioritising the elite

Crucial areas of participation, grassroots sport, schools and health need much more than what is in this manifesto. Flagship high-participation sports such as **football** and **swimming** are declining. Over the past year, the number of people playing sport for at least half an hour per week has **decreased overall** by 125,100, largely as a result of a decline in the number of people who are swimming regularly. Worryingly, there was a decline in participation among those in the lowest socio-economic groups of more than 470,000.

While the Conservatives show a commitment to support elite sports funding as part of the legacy, some sports have had their funding removed entirely. It is perhaps **basketball**, which best demonstrates the Conservatives' lack of planning. The manifesto talks of the National Basketball Association playing in British inner-city stadiums, with the aim of establishing a franchise.

But this message conflicts with the last government's approach to grassroots participants: as it stands, 217,900 people aged 14 and over play basketball at least once a week, and the sport receives £9 million in public funding from Sports England. Meanwhile, canoeing receives more than £20 million in funding from UK Sport, while participation in this sport stands at only 45,700.

Commitment to schools

The Tories also plan to support primary school sport with £150 million per year, paid directly to head teachers, until 2020, to support a minimum two hours of high-class sport and PE each week. This is a substantial commitment to engage young children in sport. This is needed, as in January 2015, a **survey reported** that on average pupils across all key stages were offered less than two hours of PE per week. There was also a marked decline in school links with outside clubs; a major factor not addressed in the manifesto.

There is a pledge to improve community sports facilities in more than 30 cities across England. In 2015, experts noted that **local authorities are core providers** of grassroots sports. But these bodies are experiencing problems relating to current economic climate, and have ultimately had to **reduce costs**. A result of this is reduced investment in grassroots sports provision and/or increases in pitch fees and the **cost of facility hire**.

While it is difficult to measure the impact that closure of facilities has on society, it will certainly have a negative impact on **social cohesion and well-being**. The investment in 3G pitches is welcomed. But there is a missed opportunity to put in place a real grassroots agenda, which could have been funded by the 2014 BT/SKY football TV deal.

The Tories promise to continue to invest in participation and physical activity. Recognising sport's vital benefits to health is common ground with the main parties. The role of exercise in controlling diabetes is specifically mentioned. The **World Health Report** from 2003 found that physical inactivity is responsible for 1% of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) lost globally, and 3% of those lost in established market economies. The manifesto fails to make **the link** between the cost burden of inactivity on the NHS. Scottish data indicates that for every £1 spent on reducing inactivity levels, £8 is **saved**.

The 2012 Olympic and Paralympic impact and legacy are also central to the Conservatives sport pledges, underpinning much of their future plans. Through international sporting mega events, the manifesto suggests that the party will maximise the opportunities for tourism and jobs. But no pledges are forthcoming to demonstrate how they plan to deliver this promise. Recent evidence actually shows some sporting events can be **bad deals for cities**.

The manifesto also promises to lift the number of women on national sports governing bodies to at least 25% by 2017 and seek to increase participation in sport by women and girls. This hardly seems ambitious or fair in terms of gender equality. The SNP, for example, are recommending 50-50 quotas on all boards.

The UK Conservative party manifesto for 2015 promises a better and more secure Britain in terms of sport. But there is a failure to find solutions for declining participation rates in key sports, and unhealthy inactivity levels. The insecure future for grassroots sport also needs a

plan, and quickly.

The Conversation's Manifesto Check deploys academic expertise to scrutinise the parties' plans.